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PREACHED AT THE
PRIMARY VISITATION

HELD BY THE
Butler
BISHOP OF HEREFORD,

AT
CHURCH STRETTON, IN THE COUNTY OF SALOP,

On WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17, 1789,

BY
JOHN MAINWARING, B.D.
RECTOR OF CHURCH STRETTON,

AND
LADY MARGARET'S PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

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TO THE RIGHT REVEREND

J O H N,

LORD BISHOP OF HEREFORD,

THE FOLLOWING

S E R M O N,

PREACHED AND PUBLISHED AT HIS LORDSHIP'S REQUEST,

IS

MOST HUMBL Y INSCRIBED.

TO THE RIGHT REVEREND

J. O. N.

LORD BISHOP OF HEREFORD,

THE FOLLOWING

S. E. R. M. O. N.

RECEIVED AND RETURNED AT HIS LORDSHIP'S REQUEST

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MOST HUMBLY INSCRIBED

ACTS X. 25, 26.

AND AS PETER WAS COMING IN, CORNELIUS MET HIM,
AND FELL DOWN AT HIS FEET, AND WORSHIPPED HIM:
BUT PETER TOOK HIM UP, SAYING, STAND UP, I MY-
SELF ALSO AM A MAN.

SOME learned Moralists of our own Country, and some
eminent Philosophers on the Continent, have endea-
voured to trace up almost every movement of the mind
and heart to Self-love, as its primary source. This prin-
ciple, as they suppose, led men to Idolatry, and disposed
them to worship Creatures resembling themselves, and even
the Vices and Passions of frail Mortals, how low and de-
grading soever. But among the many refinements of learned
Writers, there seems to be hardly any more groundless, or
fanciful, than this. For how could Planetary-Worship,
allowed to be the first species, originate from Self-love? Or
what connection can there be between them? The Worship
also of the *Elements* seems to be next in the order of succe-
sion to that of the Sun, Moon, and Stars. Indeed, those
great Powers of Nature, which strike the senses, and impress
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the imagination with so much force, point out to us the true origin of superstitious Worship. Two of the most active springs in the human frame, are hope, and fear: they are among the most useful and necessary principles belonging to our Nature, and are the great supporters of true Piety, although the consequence of their excess and wrong application was, Idolatry. Whatever was the true source of it, could we compute the services, which Christianity has rendered to the world, by removing that dreadful evil, which for so many ages had infested every part of it, this single instance of its astonishing efficacy, though it were easy to mention a thousand others, would be sufficient to attest the divinity of its origin. But how much soever we may *wish* the conversion of those, whose disbelief arises from a vicious principle, an overweening vanity, or a blind submission to deceitful guides; that impartial attention, and freedom from prejudice, without which evidence is useless, and conviction is impossible, is not to be expected from such persons. To the *conscientious* Sceptic, and *ingenuous* Doubter, I would gladly submit the following considerations.

I. What, in all probability *would have been* the condition of mankind, if the Christian Revelation had not been granted?

II. Whether

II. Whether there was any ground to hope, that the universal darkness and corruption of Natural Religion ever would, or could have been removed by human endeavours?

III. Whether it were reasonable to expect that Christianity itself should escape corruption; and if not, whether the errors which have been mixed with the doctrines of the Gospel can justly be urged as Objections against it?

An examination of these several points may lead to the removal of some prejudices peculiar to enlightened times; and of some mistakes into which even good men of all times are apt to fall.

In order to form a surer judgment concerning the first Article, viz.

What *would* have been the state of mankind, had the Christian Revelation been withheld, we have only to recollect, what the condition of it *was* before the appearance of Christ.

Considering the barbarity of the first ages, the want of written records, the impure sources of Tradition, and other wilful, as well as unavoidable defects of Profane history,

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we cannot wonder that the Ancients were so greatly perplexed in explaining the origin of things. No Writer, not divinely commissioned, could be qualified to inform us, how we ourselves, and the world we inhabit, were first introduced into Being: in what condition, and under what laws we were placed. But from the History which Moses has left, and which the Providence of God has preserved for more than 3000 Years, we learn enough to dissipate all anxious doubts respecting the intentions of the great Creator. We learn, that notwithstanding the gracious and wonderful plan laid down for the recovery of Man from the worst effects of his fatal transgression, *one* part of the Curse would remain uncanceled. Sin, which sentenced him to mortality, pain, and disease, so altered his original frame, that his passions, ministers of pure pleasures while he was innocent, were the tyrants of his reason: and his reason, which was given him for a faithful guide, became a Pander to his passions. Yet *some* there were, who maintained a noble conflict with corrupt Nature, and *their* endeavours were always rewarded — always favoured either by open assurances, or secret supports from above. But the far greater part proceeded onward with a blind precipitancy in the horrid progress from bad to worse. Inbred, wrong inclinations were so increased by indulgence, so strengthened by habit and example, that neither the natural punish-
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ments annexed to vice, nor the reproaches of conscience, nor even the warnings of inspired teachers, could prevent that general, and abandoned profligacy, which called for a special interposal, and drew down the judgment of the Deluge. On the renewal of our race by Noah and his sons, notwithstanding the instance of the divine displeasure so recently displayed in that terrible overthrow, and the earnest endeavours of the several Patriarchs to preserve and perpetuate in their descendants a sense of religion, the same evil bias showed itself again in all the wild extravagances of the mind and heart.

Let it not be supposed from this state of things that no end was answered by religious instruction; or that the Preachers of righteousness were of little service because iniquity and error so generally prevailed. Idolatry, which spread so wide, with all its attendant vices, would, without such restraints, have quite overrun the globe, and effaced all knowledge of a God from the human mind. But the prevention of this mischief was but a small part of the benefit the world derived from those illustrious teachers. In all ages, even in the worst of times, many bad men have been happily reformed, many good have been greatly improved, by the joint efficacy of instruction and example. And even where such instructions have failed most, the uses of them

are still manifest. For they have served to demonstrate the *goodness* of God to his frail creatures in affording them all possible opportunities of amendment. They also served to vindicate his *justice*, I mean, in those severer measures, which the honour of his laws, and the welfare of the universe might render expedient.

II. We are next to inquire, whether there is the least probability, that the universal darkness and corruption of Natural religion ever would, or could have been removed by any human endeavours?

If there existed any human means of sufficient force to produce this effect, it must be *Reason*. But the very existence of Idolatry, as a general practice, argues such a total perversion of this faculty, as leaves not the least ground to hope it should ever restore its own powers, and apply them with success to religious subjects. The whole tenour of history, both sacred and profane, confirms the justness of this conclusion. In *such* subjects the nations most renowned for political wisdom, were of all others the most ignorant. I need not notice the gross absurdities in the Creed of the Chaldeans, Egyptians, Phenicians, Greeks, and Romans, whether we consider the *Objects* of their *Worship*, or the rites and ceremonies with which it was accompanied.

accompanied. Among the two last mentioned nations there *did* indeed arise at certain periods, men of singular talents, deep reflection, and refined sentiment, who felt and deplored the degeneracy of their Nature, and the strange perverseness of the will and understanding, though quite at a loss either to explain, or correct them. After all their laborious researches, they left the received Theology, and the Morals it inspired, just as they were. Solon, Socrates, and Plato, regarding Religion in a political view, approved and defended the superstitions they despised. The first of the three, the renowned Legislator of Greece, not only conformed to those practices, but incurred the disgrace of adding to them, having erected a Temple to the unchaste Venus, though in all Greece, so full of Temples, not one was erected to Conjugal love. Among the Ancients no one was ever more justly esteemed for his worth and good sense, than Socrates, who in his moral inquiries was the most successful, because he was the most unpretending of all the Philosophers. Shocked at the pride of his pedantic brethren, he openly avowed his own ignorance: and, in all inquiries concerning Nature and Providence, the defects of human reason appeared to him so great, and so invincible, that he declared it the duty of every one to follow the religion of his Country, although he well knew no Country was ever cursed with a more senseless and scandalous worship.

ship. When accused of denying the Gods whom the people adored, though his enemies could only take away a life he was not solicitous to save, he said not a word in defence of his conduct, unwilling to disturb the public tranquillity by attempting a reform not to be accomplished by any human ability.

His famous disciple Plato, who seems to have caught some sparks of divine truth from the sacred Writers, when speaking of the God, who formed the Universe, expresses himself in these terms, — “ To discover him is difficult, to declare him to the people, unlawful and forbidden.” He therefore makes a solemn vow never to speak of him but with an enigmatical secrecy, for fear of exposing so great a truth to contempt and mockery. A strong proof how much the morals of his countrymen stood in need of correction! As if those truths, which have the greatest influence on the heart and affections, ought to be concealed from the bulk of mankind, and buried in the breasts of speculative Sages!

It is true, the Unity of the Godhead is said to have been taught, and the rewards and punishments of a future state to have been shadowed out at the representation of the famous Eleusinian Mysteries. The importance of the subjects
canvassed

canvassed there, as well as the profound veneration in which they were held, might seem to promise some extensive benefits. But the profound *secrecy* which the initiated were bound to observe, is a plain proof they were not directed to any noble purpose of general instruction. And if they *had* been designed to lead men by degrees to a better system, all hopes of this sort would have been defeated by the baseness of those, who contrived to corrupt them.

Although the sprightly and penetrating genius of the polished Athenians did not suggest any plan for promoting the public welfare by putting Religion on a more rational footing; something at least might be expected in this way from the solidity and gravity of the Roman character.

Rome, from the divine Auspices observed at her foundation, and from the high pretensions of her boasted origin, assumed the title of the sacred City; and in her earlier period with reason imputed the increasing splendor and prosperity of the state to the piety and virtue of the people. This indeed appeared in all her institutions, whether of the civil, or military kind, stamped as they constantly were, with a religious character; and consecrated by some previous act of public devotion. And it must be confessed, that, how superstitious soever the practice might be, the principle was excellent.

Numa,

Numa, the successor of Romulus, and scholar of Pythagoras, was, by his temper and talents, every way fitted to redeem Religion from her double bondage under vice and ignorance. What is more, he had power to execute his designs, and mould the minds of the people to any persuasion his judgment might approve. He *did* make great alterations in the sacred Offices, and by the introduction of splendid spectacles, of showy and striking ceremonies, awed an ignorant and barbarous race into some compliance with the rules of duty. But his claims to inspiration were considered by every man of sense as mere pretences; and his sacred institutions as chiefly subservient to political purposes. For as a superstitious, and a truly religious fear are alike efficacious in restraining the passions, the violence of these, which causes so many mischiefs to the community at large, may be prevented or corrected by a false religion, though itself the source of other mischiefs. It is only a true religion which can promote both public order, and private happiness, by improving and exalting the good qualities of our nature, while it restrains and controuls the bad. The system of Numa had none of these celestial characters. Its main design was to give greater solemnity to the public Worship. The purity of it was not in contemplation. It may perhaps be said, that at a period when the Roman State was but just in its infancy, improvements of that magnitude were not to be expected.

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But there is another Person of the same country, who lived in times of the greatest improvement, and made the greatest advances in all the parts of knowledge. And surely, if ever any man was formed to enlighten his countrymen, and amend their Morals, it should seem to be Cicero; who in early youth possessed the sedateness and good sense of maturer age; and, when old, devoted the whole of his leisure to Moral and Theological inquiries. The sentiments of great men concerning religion, and the influence of religion upon them, are never more discernible, than in times of public distress, especially when they themselves are involved in it. That illustrious Statesman lived just long enough to see the ruin of the noblest republic that ever existed,—a republic too, preserved from ruin by his own virtue and ability. He had wisdom enough to foretel that disastrous change, but wanted fortitude to support him under it. His philosophy was not settled, like that of Christians, on just and consistent notions of divine benevolence. His faith, though in many respects superior to the common standard, was unworthy of the beneficent Creator, and universal Parent. As if the remainder of the world had no title to regard, *he* too, like the rest of his arrogant countrymen, looked upon the Ruler of the Universe as the partial Protector of a single People,—the tutelar Deity of Rome alone. It is painful to reflect, that this most excellent

lent Man, and most distinguished Writer of his own, or any other age, should squander his valuable hours in explaining the jargon of the Grecian Schools, and that the chief use of his labours was, to embellish Error, and decorate Deformity.

It must be confessed, that the flourishing state of philosophy and learning among the Greeks and Romans afforded the fairest opportunity of judging, what Reason and Genius could accomplish of themselves. In the science of legislation and government, in the military, and in the finer arts, their excellence is unrivalled. Who would conceive it possible, were it not known from authentic history, that the religion of Nations so illustrious should consist of fables too ridiculous for the ears of children, and of superstitions that would shame a savage!

It is evident, I suppose, by this time, that to enlighten the minds of men, and to correct their depraved dispositions, nothing less than the divine grace and assistance would, or could be of any avail. And, as God, in his dealings with his Creatures, always acts in a manner the most conformable to the Nature he has given them, we may well imagine, that *one* inducement for withholding so long the invaluable blessing of the Christian Revelation, was, to convince

vince the World by the most feeling proofs, how wretched it must ever have remained if left to Reason, and its own direction.

III. We are now to inquire, Whether there be any ground to expect, that Christianity itself should escape Corruption, and whether the errors which have been mixed with the doctrines of the Gospel can justly be urged as objections against it?

It may seem strange, that these particulars should be considered as matter of discussion. But the inquiry is too well justified by the over-anxious concern of some, and the unfair conclusions of others. It is curious enough that men of opposite views and principles should concur in demanding of Christianity what no system of Religion can ever admit, — a degree of security not compatible with the nature of Virtue, or with the methods of Moral government.

Reason was given to man for his guidance and direction, and, had he used it properly, would have shewn him the path of duty, and have kept him in it. Revealed religion was intended to remedy the mischiefs arising from perverted Reason, but is itself liable to like perversion and abuse. The Gospel, though divinely supported, has shared in the vicissi-

tudes of human affairs, and never appears with serener lustre than when contemplated in its suffering state. After the extraordinary aids which attended the first planting of it were withdrawn, it was left to depend, for the most part, on the force of its own excellence, on the subsisting proofs of its miraculous introduction, and the assiduous labours of a standing Ministry. And the effects it produced, notwithstanding the seemingly unsurmountable difficulties it had to contend with, were answerable to its doctrines so long as these were rightly understood, and fairly interpreted. But the pride of reasoning, and fondness for power and authority, which began to appear even in the times of the Apostles themselves, soon occasioned such rivalries, disputes, and heresies, as greatly disturbed and endangered the rising Church. As this, through its friendly connection with political systems, increased in splendor and authority, the same passions had a wider sphere to range in, and a stronger force to impel them. The genius of Christianity, as well as the clear declarations of its Author, that "his kingdom was not of this world," and that, "to the Poor the Gospel was preached," took away all pretence for keeping the People in a state of ignorance, as well as for aspiring to Ecclesiastical dominion. It might seem incredible after this, that the Gospel itself should be *made* the pretence for both these enormities. If the rise and progress of the Papal power had

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not been foretold by our Saviour, yet the greatness of the evils proceeding from such corruptions of his religion, instead of weakening the evidence for it, would give it the strongest confirmation. For no system of human contexture could have endured such trials. Unbelievers, who are so quick in spying objections, overlook this obvious conclusion; and under the sameness of names endeavour to hide the distinction between ideas. They judge of Christianity just as if there were no Christians in the world besides bigotted Papists, and fanatical Protestants; and as if errors of every kind were equal indications of falsehood and deceit: whereas, not only the defects, infirmities, and vices; but the very excellences of Nature may contribute to mislead us: as in all the cases of a pious and sincere, but misguided or intemperate zeal for truth and virtue.

On the revival of Letters the honest and intrepid Zeal of the Reformers cannot be too much applauded, though the errors into which they fell afforded matter of exultation to to their crafty opposers. It is confessed the idle and fierce disputes which arose between some of the chiefs engaged in the Reformation, cast a shade on its lustre. Yet the Romanists triumph with as little reason on *this* account, as Unbelievers do at the Corruptions which *they* have introduced. The credit of Christianity and its Restorers *may* in-

deed, and *must* be injured by such blameable conduct: but, after all, every cause, and every persuasion must be tried on its own proper grounds, and intrinsic merits. Even those maxims of which the Catholics are now ashamed and which they have actually retracted in the most public manner, would alone be sufficient to evince the rectitude of the Protestant principle: and if the evidence on which the truth of the Gospel rests, be *not* sufficient, it is hard indeed! for it is far more convincing than that, on which we all continue to act through the whole of life, or on which we ground our belief of any fact recorded in authentic history.

I will now conclude with a few Reflections naturally connected with the foregoing Observations, and particularly applicable to the present Occasion.

I. And, in the first place, we may observe the fatal effects which sometimes flow from the indulgence of affections innocent and laudable in themselves: I mean, in the present case, the prejudices arising from a just esteem on one hand, and a well-grounded aversion on the other. Deeply disgusted with the follies of the established worship, and the horrid impurities annexed to it, intelligent Heathens were tempted to question, or deny the truth and certainty of all religious principles: just as the abuses of Popery have pre-
possessed

possessed many in our times against all Revelation. Yet the former *might* have seen, that the general, concurring sentiments of mankind concerning the existence of a supreme Being, and the necessity of divine Worship, were the *true* foundations, on which the whole fabric of the Pagan fictions was erected. They *might* have seen, that the fact of Creation, without a God; and of a settled Order in Nature, without a Providence, was at least as hard to reconcile with reason and common sense, as any the absurdest Article in the Vulgar Creed. But the modern Sceptic, who makes the abuses of Popery, or any errors of the reformed Persuasion, a pretence for rejecting Christianity, if compared with those Atheistical Heathens, is much more inexcusable. For the Gospel, like the Book of Nature, lies open to inspection; and the more it is examined and scrutinized, the stronger is the appearance that it had God for its Author.

II. We may, in the next place, extract useful lessons of caution from the strong propensity to extremes both in the enemies and friends of Religion: and this is particularly observable in the dangerous humour of allowing too much, or too little to the natural faculties of the human mind.

Concerning the *proofs* of a divine Revelation, and the *validity* of its pretensions, Reason alone can judge and determine.

termine. Yet supposing that God should be pleased to communicate his will, or any particulars relating to his own Nature, and designs; he, who should admit of no higher principle than reason to direct his judgment; and determine his assent *in regard to the things revealed*, could never be a Christian; nor even a consistent Deist. For the foundation of all piety and devotion is; the sense of God's greatness, joined with the consciousness of our own imperfection; and under the light of Nature men of the greatest genius quickly perceived the limits of their understanding whenever they attempted to go far in Metaphysical inquiries. And in this we may discern the goodness of God, who, by giving us faculties less perfect, and but partial information in some points, has made us more capable of advances in virtue, and of acquiring those graces, which above all others recommend us to his favour.

The grand source of Infidelity, in men not viciously inclined, is, the want of modesty in thinking; — the fond conceit, that, because they are endued with intelligence, and ought not to believe without reason; they *must* be qualified, of course, to *reason out their faith*; — to explore all subjects alike, and sound the very depths of the divine Nature and decrees. This notion, so erroneous in its principle, so pernicious in its tendency, is common alike to times the most ignorant

ignorant and the most enlightened. It has been a constant source of divisions among Christians themselves, who, not knowing where to stop in their bold and curious researches, have ever mixed with the awful and sublime truths of the Gospel, the fanciful inventions of their own brain. Indeed, the Infidel, who rashly rejects all Mysteries, and the Believer, who absurdly endeavours to unfold and explain them, proceed, though from different motives, on the same treacherous ground, — the natural strength and sufficiency of the human intellect.

Another most pernicious extreme, too common with some *Christian* teachers, is that of considering Natural and Revealed Religion as rivals or antagonists: and, because *Faith* has peculiar and transcendent excellences, of reprobating *Reason*, and treating with contempt the plain duties of Morality, as well as the Clergy for insisting upon them. Very different from this is the language of our Saviour! “He that cometh to God, must believe that he is:” and again, “Ye believe in God, believe also in *me*:” — clearly pointing out not only the *agreement* of his religion with the great truths discernible by the light of Nature, but the intimate union, and strict alliance subsisting between them.

III. Although the *errors of a false worship, and the corrup-*
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tions of a true one, may be traced to the same origin — the depravity of the mind and will; and though they resemble each other so exactly in their principal features, — superstition and enthusiasm; yet how wide is the difference between them in *another* view? To dissipate *the darknefs of Pagan ignorance*, demanded an exprefs Revelation: to remedy *the corruptions of the Christian system*, there needed only the recovery of Reason and good Sense from the long lethargy under which they had lain. Indeed, when we consider the curious causes, and wonderful accidents that conspired to bring about the Reformation; as well as the vast consequence of the Event itself; we justly refer it to the operation of that Being, who, in a manner imperceptible to us, though not miraculous, can compass his designs; and bend, without forcing, the inclinations and passions of men to the purposes of his Providence.

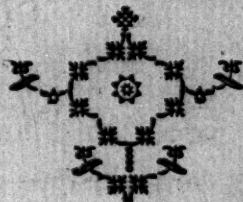
IV. and lastly, If from the universal prevalence of ignorance and error *before* the times of Christ we clearly collect, that human Reason was not, of itself, sufficient for leading men to truth and happiness; in like manner, from the Corruption of its Doctrines, we, with equal certainty, conclude, that, after a Revelation has once been given, in order to understand them in the true sense, to preserve them in their genuine purity, to teach them with proper effect, to defend

defend them against Heretics, Enthusiasts, and Opposers, the aids of human learning are indispensably necessary, and must ever continue of the utmost importance. It *may* indeed itself, like all other things, and *has* been, and perhaps ever *will* be misapplied in particular instances, even by well-meaning men: but, from the general conduct and application of it in the present and precedent centuries, we may gather the most encouraging Omen—that, as the first signal effect of Christianity was the abolition of Idolatry; so, with the blessing of heaven, the final effect of Learning will be the fall of Infidelity. Strong symptoms of its decline are already apparent. The good sense of mankind begins to be *offended* at the bold excesses of unprincipled Scepticism. The raillery of free-Thinkers will no longer pass for reasoning, nor their slanderous insinuations for sound objections. The tricks of Sophistry have been detected so often, and exposed so effectually, that the cautious and sincere inquirer cannot well be misled. The illiberal prejudices so artfully raised against Religion, and its Ministers are greatly abated. An admired Historian ought to have considered all this before he hazarded his sarcastic reflections on the Clergy at large;—reflections, which, even if applied to the *Catholic* Clergy of these mild, and enlightened times, would be very injurious; and much more to those of our own Country, of whom one might venture to predict, that they will sooner

be the Objects of oppression, than the Authors of it. No sensible person among them is desirous of more power, influence, or respect, than is necessary to the success of his Ministry: and whoever would give them less, although he were a better Historian than Livy or Tacitus, is an enemy to his Country. For who can be ignorant, that the conscientious observance of moral duties is essential to public order? that, if virtue is not sustained and animated by *religious* sentiments, — by the awful apprehensions, and enlivening hopes which accompany *these*; passions the most destructive of order and good government will break through or elude all rules and restraints of authority and law? In that happy region where the Gospel is professed and taught in its greatest purity, who can be ignorant, how important it is to the public welfare, that a just regard should be paid to those, in whom the administration of Religion is invested by the State?

St. Paul himself was forced to assume the language of vanity in replying to his vain-glorious disingenuous Opponents: but for the base attempts of pretended Teachers to injure his character as an Apostle, his own merits had never been the theme of his discourse or contemplation. Neither would these humblest of his successors, the Clergy of the Reformed Church, have ever thought of stating *their* pretensions

tensions to praise or esteem, but for the industry employed to misrepresent and defame them. It would be easy to produce from this Order a long list of Persons, whose Names would be an ornament to any history, and reflect an honour on any age or country. But, instead of recounting their praises, let us emulate their conduct; by defending Religion with the same dispassionate and manly Zeal: and if we fail, by the force of our arguments, to convince its Opposers; yet, by a faithful discharge of our duty, we shall disprove their censures, and confute their reproaches.



to nations to prize us, and for the industry employed
to misrepresent and belittle them. It would be easy to pro-
duce from this Office a long list of persons whose names
would be as ornaments to any history, and reflect an honour
on any age or country. But instead of recounting their
virtues, let us rather, in our country, by denouncing Religion
with the same passion and equally zeal: and if we fail,
by the force of our arguments, to convince its Opponents;
yet, by a faithful discharge of our duty, we shall improve
their consciences, and excite their reasonings. We shall